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AUTHOR King, Caryn M.; McDonald, William E.
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ABSTRACT

For 8 weeks during 1991, a project was conducted in which literacy was emphasized within the context of one fourth-grade social studies classroom. The overall goal for this unit of instruction was to create language-rich experiences that would stimulate higher order thinking about the concept of Liberty. Additionally, students were to become more aware of the cognitive aspects of learning through class activities involving reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The activities were meant to be social events since human interaction is an important component of literate behavior. Literacy events included oral presentations by the teacher, a Martin Luther King collage, writing a compare-and contrast essay, and an interactive video. Activities stimulated thinking and discussion, evaluation and interpretation, and writing and revision. (PRA)

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Liberty, Learning, and Literacy:
Promoting Higher Order Thinking in the Social Studies Classroom

Caryn M. King
Grand Valley State University

William E. McDonald
Falk Laboratory School

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Liberty, Learning, and Literacy:
Promoting Higher Order Thinking in the Social Studies Classroom

Caryn M. King
Grand Valley State University

William E. McDonald
Falk Laboratory School

For eight weeks during the winter of 1991, a project was conducted in which literacy was emphasized within the context of one social studies classroom. The overall goal for this unit of instruction was to create language-rich experiences that would stimulate higher order thinking about the concept of Liberty. Additionally, students were to become more aware of the cognitive aspects of learning. This paper describes some of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities that fourth graders encountered as they learned about Liberty.

The activities involving literacy, hereafter called literacy events, were planned with the following ideas in mind. First, literacy events should initially expose students to subject matter. More importantly, however, literacy events should also provide students with opportunities to interpret, apply, and reflect upon their subject matter knowledge (Banks, 1990). Second, it is necessary to preserve and maintain the wholeness of literacy events (Goodman, 1986). This means that literacy events should not be brief, isolated exercises. Rather, they should be genuine activities that have meaningful purposes. Finally, literacy events must be social events since human interaction is an important component of literate behavior (Heath, 1991).

A variety of traditional and innovative instructional materials provided the starting point for many of the literacy events. In this classroom, a social studies textbook was not used during this unit of instruction. Instead, a variety of reading materials exposed students to multiple viewpoints and contexts for Liberty. Excerpts from primary historical documents such as the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech were used. Students read Scholastic News as well as other magazines, newspaper articles, and books brought in from home. In addition, materials such as encyclopedias, library books, and one workbook were used. During the Liberty Unit, students were also taught how to use an interactive video disk program. Technology as a tool for learning is often dehumanized in relation to student/teacher interaction. However, the opportunity to program this technology, to select particular sections for use, and to add or give directions to commercially produced material, provided many learning alternatives in the areas of shared discussion, higher order thinking, and writing. The resultant interactions between students themselves and with the teacher created a stimulating environment for learning about Liberty.

The first literacy event involved the oral presentation of two historical vignettes. The first vignette dealt with the Revolutionary War and the second with the forming of the U.S. Constitution. Both vignettes were presented by the teacher early in the unit and exposed students

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to subject matter by way of listening and note taking. The day before the first vignette was presented, students discussed the difficulty in deciding what to include when taking notes during a lecture. They concluded that lectures would be most beneficial if they were presented in a hierarchial format (i.e., presentation of a main idea followed by supporting details). Following this discussion, the teacher decided that the hierarchical format would be used when presenting each vignette. A graphic organizer was created and written on the board to visually show students the main ideas. In addition, details consisting of important names, dates, and places were written on the board. Students could now concentrate on the listening task at hand rather than worry about missing an important name, using the incorrect spelling, etc. Throughout the actual presentations, students' attention was often directed to the board in order to guide their listening and note taking. This was done not only to structure the activity for our fourth graders, but also to show them that their input about this authentic activity was valued.

The second literacy event was the creation of a Martin Luther King collage. This activity provided students with the opportunity to interact with one another for the purpose of interpreting and synthesizing the subject matter. To do this, pairs of students read different chapters from the Martin Luther King, Jr.: His Life and Dream (Farris, 1986) workbook. Students also participated in a school-wide celebration of King's birthday. Then, working in groups of four, students created a collage to summarize the information in the chapter they had read. Each student was required to contribute something to the collage and provide justification for its inclusion. When all groups were finished, a large group discussion took place. Each group presented its collage to the class and answered questions from classmates. A large classroom collage depicting the life of Martin Luther King was created from the individual ones. The large collage was hung on the wall and was a frequent reference point throughout the remainder of the unit.

The third type of literacy event required students to write in response journals. This writing activity served three functions: to know oneself, to participate in community activities, and to demonstrate academic competence (Marzano, 1991). In preparation for one writing assignment, students read and discussed excerpts from the Declaration of Independence, King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and President George Bush's letter which was written to Saddam Hussein prior to the onset of the Persian Gulf War. During class discussions, students first considered each document and its relationship to the theme of liberty. Then, students discussed the similarities and differences of each document as it related to liberty. Students were encouraged to discuss the same topics with their parents. Finally, students wrote a journal entry that compared and contrasted the three documents in terms of their own personal notion of liberty. This literacy event provided students with the opportunity to think deeply about the concept of Liberty in more than one historical context. Moreover, it required students to orally discuss their ideas not only with their classmates and teacher but also with their parents. In this sense, this

literacy event was a social event as well as a personal learning event.

During this unit, students received teacher feedback about their journal writing and also shared their written responses with one another. For example, one series of lessons included watching a Civil War video (Burns, 1989). After viewing the video and discussing the content each day, students wrote an unstructured response. Then students paired and read each other's work. Afterward, as a whole group, the process of sharing written ideas with one another was discussed. Students told us that the process of sharing was often difficult because different people had different ideas, and sometimes students did not agree with one another. A single question, "How does this experience relate to the Civil War?" was enough for most students to connect their experience with those of people living during the time of the Civil War. In this instance, literacy provided a means by which students could make important, revealing connections between subject matter content and their own lives.

The fourth literacy event involved the interactive video disk. Three specific lessons were designed using The Statue of Liberty video disk (Burns, 1985). 1) Quick Quotes - a whole lesson on paraphrasing short quotations from the disk; 2) Big Quotes - a program completed by pairs of students that required them to write "what" was said, "who" said it, "why" that person had been selected to speak, and "how" that quote impacted students' views of liberty; 3) Faces, Feelings, and Futures - a series of frames selected from the video disk to be viewed by students at their leisure, after which they were required to write a list of adjectives and then an essay describing their interpretations of the immigrants' lives and thoughts. This was an important aspect of the Liberty unit because the lessons involving this technology were highly motivational for students and stimulated higher order thinking about the concept of Liberty.

Student assessment was on-going throughout the Liberty unit. Given our goals for the unit, it was important to monitor the processes of learning in addition to the products of learning. To accomplish this, students were observed informally as they completed various tasks. A type of portfolio assessment was used. Students created Liberty folders in which completed work and work in progress was kept. Students' response journals were also placed in the Liberty folder. Frequently throughout the unit, students' response journals were read, and the teacher wrote comments in the journals made about the ideas and questions that students had written. Often, written comments would refer one student to another student who had expressed interest in the same topic. Other work that was placed in the Liberty folders was also examined. This process yielded valuable information regarding how well students were reacting to the activities and the materials selected for use during this unit. Moreover, it provided insight in designing subsequent instruction that was meaningful and challenging to the students.

The literacy events associated with this unit on Liberty were often social events that had a particular significance to the students in the classroom. Such an emphasis stimulated thinking

and discussion, evaluation and interpretation, and writing and revision. The final outcome of these lessons was much more than the mere recognition and recall of subject matter so evident in many social studies classrooms. As one student wrote in her journal, "I think the way this was set up with learning centers, bulletin boards, and many things to say and do was great. It was challenging, but not too challenging and not too easy. I think that's how most classes should be."

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